

Relationships 101 By REBECCA WINTERS – Time Magazine – 11/24/03

Is a classroom the place to learn about love? Some college and high school students are finding out

"O.K. now I'm going to show you how to complain," says Marline Pearson to a class of 15 unusually attentive college students. Pearson, a sociologist, is teaching a course called Couples Relationships at Madison Area Technical College in Madison, Wis. When one of her students mentions that her boyfriend is always, like, falling asleep when they're supposed to do stuff, Pearson seizes what feels like a teachable moment. She suggests the student zero in on a specific time when her boyfriend dozed off and tell him how it made her feel. "Stay away from 'You always' and 'You never,'" she advises. "Even if you think the person does it always."

This new breed of romantic counseling — equal parts sex ed, social science and Dear Abby — is now being offered as formal courses at colleges and high schools across the country. Over two weekends, Pearson's students learn methods developed by researchers at the University of Denver and used for marital counseling in churches and in the military. They watch videos of fighting couples and discuss how conflicts can spiral out of control. They learn tidy formulas for success and failure in love: the three characteristics of successful couples (one is a man who can accept influence from a woman), the four behaviors that spell doom (constant criticism is a biggie). Each time Pearson rattles off a list of rules, her students start furiously taking notes, not because they'll be tested — they won't — but because they're truly dying to know.

"There's a great hunger for understanding relationships, not just body parts," says Sarah Brown, president of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. "Young people tell us they're almost drowning in information about AIDS, condoms, pregnancy. But they want to know, 'How do I break up with my boyfriend without hurting his feelings?'" One recent study of college students' use of counseling services at Kansas State University showed that the percentage of students seeking help for relationship problems rose from 34% in 1989 to 60% in 2001. School counselors say courses like Pearson's — as well as more than half a dozen national relationship-curriculum programs in high schools — are filling a void. They offer healthy models of love for children of divorce and a middle ground in the wake of the culture wars that polarized sex education in the 1980s, with emotionless biology classes at one end and preachy abstinence lectures at the other.

Young love has always been traumatic. But the anxious, euphoric stage these programs address used to be a lot shorter. In 1960 the average age of first marriage was 20 for women, 23 for men; today, it's 25 for women, 27 for men. With dating starting at around 15, says David Popenoe of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, "now you have 10 or 15 years of figuring out what to do with the opposite sex when marriage isn't uppermost in your mind." It may take them longer to get there, but most high school seniors—65% of girls and 58% of boys, according to a University of Michigan study — still say it's "very likely" they will stay married to the same person for life, numbers that are up slightly from 15 years ago.

Of course there's no guarantee that taking a course will help teens and young adults achieve the kind of relationships they say they ultimately want. The last time the U.S. threw itself into teaching young people about love was in the 1950s, when social scientists at colleges offered marriage education. By the '60s, many of those classes were being laughed off campuses as rigid and sexist, or as faulty attempts to stamp the mysteries of emotion with the imprimatur of science. "There's always going to be this sense of the imponderables," says Beth Bailey, author of *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in 20th Century America*. "People fall in love. It's not something where you can go down a checklist and match people up by scientific formulas."

There are reasons to expect that this movement may be different, however. It's more flexible about the roles of men and women and, at least in some secular classes, it makes room for homosexual relationships. Each course is unique, but the emphasis today is more on developing communication skills and less on establishing moral absolutes. "If we have the right tools, then maybe we'll have a better shot of making our relationships work," says Rebecca Olson, 22, who took Pearson's course last winter with her boyfriend, Aaron Edge, 23, to help her avoid repeating the mistakes her divorced parents had made. Last month Olson and Edge got engaged.

Pearson has decided that teenagers need to get the message before they hit college. So she's publishing a curriculum for high school students. "All their experience tells these young people to be cynical," she says. "And yet part of their spirit says, 'I want it to be different for me.'" You don't have to be an incurable romantic to hope they succeed.